San Antonio Missions

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Mission Espada

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OTHER CRAFTS

The old acequia still flows behind the mission chapel and the convento

(friars' residence and classrooms), structures whose Indian masonry has partially survived weather and time. The unusual church facade, with its three-belled espadaña and trefoil arch, is all that remains of the original chapel, the rest having been reconstructed through the years. In the convento, the kitchen and dining room also survived. Mortar for the mission buildings was made by the Indians; there are lime kilns near what was then the channel of the river, north of the mission compound.

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Mission San Francisco de la Espada is little intruded upon by the flourishing city the mission itself helped begin over 250 years ago. The fields farmed by the mission's Indians - Coahuiltecans ("Kwa-weel-tekens") and others - are, in some cases, still cultivated by descendants of the Spanish and Indian people who gathered here so long ago.

These descendants illustrate a principal goal of a Spanish mission: to prepare Indians to take part in the new Spanish world surrounding them. On the northernmost boundaries of its New World empire, Spain established missions to instruct local tribes in the skills necessary in Spanish society, and to convert them to Catholicism. The mission dramatically changed Indian life. Even when the mission ceased functioning, they were able to continue their new vocations, and intermingled with Spanish settlers and soldiers as members of the San Antonio community.

VOCATIONAL EDUCATION ON THE FRONTIER

Mission Espada reveals the variety of skills taught by the Franciscan friars. An inventory, completed at the height of Espada's prosperity in 1772, described these lands:

"The mission has two fields which are fenced in with strong mesquite logs nailed and tied. They have gates, locks, and crossbars. The large field is extensive enough to accomodate fourteen fanegas [about 122 acres] of corn, the necessary amount of beans, and orchards. Cotton is planted. There is an orchard fenced in with logs, large enough for planting whatever vegetables one may wish. It has 88 clingstone peach trees . . . . "

Here the Indians, hunters-and-gatherers before, learned farming. The friars taught them to thrash beans and shell corn in the thrashing area near the large granary.

THE IRRIGATION SYSTEM

The friars directed the Indians in the art of digging an irrigation system, or acequia. The acequia madre ("mother ditch") began almost three miles away at the Espada Dam. To make the ditch slope consistently downhill the Indians built an aqueduct across Piedras Creek, with "two arches which allow the flood waters . . . to flow through while the irrigation ditch goes its way. . . ." Completed by the 1740s, the dam, the aqueduct and the ditch still work - a tribute to the building skills of the Indians who had never before worked with stone, or built structures larger than huts.

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Along the plaza stood workshops where Indian carpenters, blacksmiths, soapmakers, brickmakers, spinners, and weavers manufactured and repaired goods used at the mission. The 1772 inventory included ". . . about 300 mesquite logs for boards; fifteen small hinges for windows; a frame saw; two adzes; a chisel for carts; [in the forge] a small oven, bellows, and the anvil on its block; four medium sized and repaired metal pots; another box with some ashes to make soap; tallow for soap; 10,000 bricks stored for any need that arises; two looms fitted with heddles; and combs for making thick mantles and blankets; one spindle for weaving; four pair of cards; thirty arrobas [about 750 pounds] of white wool; fifty-five pair of shears." The shears were to trim wool from the herd of up to 4,000 sheep, grazing at the mission's Rancho de las Cabras, 25 miles south. The Indian vaqueros, whose pre-mission diet had been only occasionally supplemented with deer or buffalo meat, learned to raise sheep and cattle. The cattle herd at times numbered over 1,200.

DECLINE AND REDISCOVERY

In 1772 the outlook for Mission Espada was bright. The large cattle herd supplied wealth to the community, which included approximately fifty Indian families. By 1794, however, the mission had suffered a significant reversal. Only fifteen families remained to receive a share of its lands. A major reason was that in 1778, all unbranded cattle had been declared to be government property, including the mission herds. With this disastrous loss the mission declined. Some Indians left to pursue their new trades; others returned to their pre-mission lifestyles. Some remained in the community that grew around Mission Espada.

The church remained under the direct care of a Franciscan priest until at least 1804, and then was under the care of Franciscans at nearby San José until the last friar left the missions in 1824. Then came many years of neglect, until Father Francis Bouchu, in the 1860s, began to reconstruct the fallen walls. Mass was said in the revitalized church until 1909, when Fr. Bouchu died. Services were restored again in 1915. A school was also begun that year, in a small building still standing near the west gate. Some families lived in the compound through the 1930s. Remains of their houses stand tall in the compound today. In the 1950s low walls were added on the foundations of colonial buildings, long ago abandoned, so they could be seen easily.

The church continues to live. Masses are celebrated in Spanish and English. Church and community activities occur regularly. Here descendants of the people who learned the catechism near the chapel doors still practice their faith. Many of the mission's neighbors follow trades their ancestors practiced in the workshops and mesquite-fenced fields of Mission San Francisco de la Espada.

Jim Corless, Park Ranger

PRESERVATION NOTE

Some of the low walls are 1950s partial reconstructions of colonial buildings. Others are original. For their preservation, and your safety, please do not walk or climb on them. Please do not disturb any artifacts.

All donations to San Antonio Missions National Historical Park are greatly appreciated, and will help preserve the missions. All donations are tax deductible and a tax form will be provided upon request.

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